

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Yellowstone River Fish Kill Fact Sheet - Updated Sept. 9, 2016

Headlines - Region 3

Fri Sep 09 08:16:00 MDT 2016

NEW:

Sept. 9 Update:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks reopened the reach of the Yellowstone River from Carbella Fishing Access Site to Point of Rocks Fishing Access Site to all recreational use Friday. Earlier this week, the section just upstream to the border of Yellowstone National Park was also reopened to all uses.

FWP staff has noted no new fish mortalities in these upper reopened reaches.

The large section of river downstream from Point of Rocks FAS to Highway 89 Bridge FAS remains closed to all use.

In the section of the river downstream of Highway 89 Bridge FAS (and east of Livingston) and eastward, crews have not documented any new mortality. The Yellowstone downstream of Highway 89 Bridge is open to all use.

FWP continues to monitor the Yellowstone River system closely, and will make decisions as to reopening additional sections of the river based on all data gathered since the fish kill was first observed. To date, the fish kill has primarily affected Mountain Whitefish.

Additional testing results on healthy fish collected in several Yellowstone tributaries are expected next week.

Sept. 6 Update:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks reopened the upper stretch of the Yellowstone River and its tributaries to fishing Tuesday – from the border of Yellowstone National Park to the Carbella Fishing Access Site. Recent surveys show this stretch has not experienced additional fish mortality since the department moved to open it to non-angling activities last week.

The section of the Yellowstone from Carbella Fishing Access Site downstream to Highway 89 Bridge Fishing Access Site remains closed to all use. FWP continues to see some dying fish in portions of this reach.

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY
COUNCIL. 2015-16

September 15, 2016

Exhibit 6

FWP will continue to monitor Yellowstone River conditions, and take into account fish mortality and test results when making decisions as to any changes in closure status.

Sept. 1 Update:

The Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission opened two sections of the Yellowstone River Thursday, Sept. 1, due to the improvement of environmental conditions that led the Commission to close the river and all of its associated tributaries on Aug. 19.

In a teleconference Thursday, after considering current test results and river conditions, the Commission opened the uppermost section of the Yellowstone to non-angling recreation only (with the mainstem of the Yellowstone through much of Paradise Valley south of Livingston remaining closed) and the section below Livingston opening completely to recreation.

The details of the decision are as follows:

Section 1

The Yellowstone River and all of its tributaries from the northern boundary of Yellowstone National Park in Gardiner, downstream to the Carbella Fishing Access Site, which is operated by the Bureau of Land Management, are open to all non-angling recreational uses. Angling remains closed in this section to protect the Yellowstone cutthroat trout fishery. On Sept. 6, department biologists will float this section to assess any change in fishery health during this period of non-angling recreational use. In the event this section does not show any detrimental change in fishery health, it will be open to all uses beginning Sept. 8. The public will be notified via press-release of the status of this section on Sept. 7.

Section 2

The mainstem Yellowstone River from the Carbella BLM Fishing Access Site downstream to the Highway 89 Bridge Fishing Access Site near Livingston, remains closed to all public occupation and recreation per the original Aug. 19 closure. However, all Yellowstone River tributaries in this section, including Armstrong, Depuy's, and Nelson's Spring Creeks, are open to all uses.

Section 3

The Yellowstone River and all of its tributaries downstream from the Highway 89 Bridge Fishing Access Site to the Highway 212 bridge in Laurel are open to all uses, with the exception of the Shields River and all of its tributaries, which remain closed to all public occupation and recreation per the original Aug. 19 closure in order to protect the Yellowstone cutthroat trout fishery. The mainstem Yellowstone River and all tributaries downstream from the Highway 212 bridge in Laurel were never part of a closure, and remain open to all uses.

In the stretches of the Yellowstone River opened Thursday, FWP has no further evidence of dead fish.

Gov. Steve Bullock supported the decision to open parts of the Yellowstone River and the implications of the decision to the local economy.

"I join Montanans in being encouraged by this first step, but we're not out of the woods yet and we must ensure that we are safeguarding Montana jobs while keeping this threat at bay," said Governor Steve Bullock. "A threat to the health of Montana's fish populations is a threat to Montana's entire outdoor economy and the tens of thousands of jobs it sustains, and I want to thank all Montanans and visitors for their ongoing support as we work to protect and preserve the health and economic benefit of the Yellowstone River for this and future generations."

The Commission and FWP appreciate the public support and responsiveness to the closure that was deemed necessary to protect the sustainability of the Yellowstone River fishery.

"Recognizing the value of the fishery, the Commission is restoring appropriate and beneficial uses of the Yellowstone River system as quickly as is prudent, given the unprecedented nature of the event," said Commission chairman Dan Vermillion.

Additional test results

On the Jefferson River, the parasite was found in one of the seven whitefish tested along with two of the three rainbow trout tested.

On the lower Shields River one whitefish out of the five tested was positive for the parasite that causes Proliferative Kidney Disease, which FWP scientists have concluded is the disease responsible for the fish kill. Additionally in the Shields River, three of the four rainbow trout tested were positive for the parasite.

None of the fish tested on Big Creek tested positive for the parasite.

It is important to note the presence of the parasite does not mean the fish are diseased or that the disease is present in the river.

Test results from the Boulder and Stillwater Rivers are not in yet.

Aug. 30 Update: The Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission will hold a conference call Thursday at 12 p.m. to hear updates on the Yellowstone River parasite and fish kill.

During the call test results – including those expected late Wednesday – from fish samples taken on various stretches of the Yellowstone and its tributaries will be discussed. Management options moving forward and any other new information available at that time will be considered. The status of the river closure and which stretches may be re-opened will also be part of Thursday's conference call.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks began surveying the Yellowstone River on Friday, Aug. 12 after receiving reports of numerous dead mountain whitefish.

Scientists have determined the catalyst for this fish kill is Proliferative Kidney Disease, which is caused by a microscopic parasite.

Last week, tests were performed on trout collected at spring creeks along the upper Yellowstone (10 trout from each) close to the area experiencing the highest level of whitefish mortality. Two brown trout from Nelson's Spring Creek tested positive for the presence of the parasite, while all other fish (13 rainbow trout and 15 brown trout) tested negative. **It is important to make the distinction that a positive test for the parasite doesn't mean the fish is diseased. There was no evidence of disease detected at these locations (despite the parasite being identified as present in one location) and no mortality documented.** All the samples tested were healthy and alive when collected.

Tests were also performed on Whitefish samples collected at the mouth of the Boulder River, at Holmgren Ranch FAS near Columbus, and at Laurel where 11 whitefish tested positive. From these same downstream locations, three rainbow trout tested positive, one tested negative.

To date FWP staff has counted more than 4,000 dead whitefish and small numbers of other species including rainbow trout, Yellowstone cutthroat, longnose suckers, sculpin and longnose dace.

FWP has confirmed the fish kill as far upstream as near the border of Yellowstone National Park to Grey Bear Fishing Access Site (west of Big Timber) – nearly 100 river miles.

Samples collected of live, dying and dead fish since Aug. 13 were sent to, and have been processed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Bozeman Fish Health Center. On Friday, Aug. 19, FWP closed the Yellowstone River between the northern boundary of Yellowstone National Park and the Highway 212 Bridge in Laurel. The closure was imposed to protect the fishery and help limit the spread of the parasite to adjacent rivers through boats, tubes, waders and other human contact and minimize further mortality in all fish species.

The Commission conference call will be streamed live on FWP's website and at each of the department's regional headquarters offices and its main headquarters office in Helena.

For more information, check on the Fish and Wildlife Commission page:
<http://fwp.mt.gov/doingBusiness/insideFwp/commission>.

OVERVIEW

FWP began surveying the Yellowstone River on Friday, Aug. 12 after receiving reports of numerous dead Mountain Whitefish.

Crews paid close attention to the stretch of the Yellowstone from Emigrant to Springdale as this appeared and continues to be the area hardest hit by the fish kill.

To date, we have counted more than 4,000 dead Whitefish and a small numbers of other species

including Rainbow Trout, Yellowstone Cutthroat, Longnose Suckers, Sculpin, and Longnose Dace.

FWP has confirmed the fish kill as far upstream as near the border of Yellowstone National Park to Grey Bear Fishing Access Site (west of Big Timber) – nearly 100 river miles.

Samples collected of live, dying and dead fish on numerous main stem floats since Aug. 13 were sent to, and have been processed by, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Bozeman Fish Health Center.

The latest round of fish sampling saw crews collecting live fish on waters outside of the known disease area (on tributaries and the stretch between Big Timber and Laurel) in order to get a better understanding of the distribution of the parasite.

It should be noted that the Department of Environmental Quality also performed water quality testing on Aug. 17 and results are expected by the end of this week.

THE CAUSE

Tests results on whitefish collected from the main stem of the Yellowstone early on indicate the catalyst for the fish kill is Proliferative Kidney Disease. The one Yellowstone Cutthroat found dead also tested positive for the disease.

The disease is caused by a microscopic parasite known to occur in Canada, the U.S. and Europe. The disease has been documented previously in two isolated locations in central Montana during the past 20 years. Recent outbreaks have occurred in Washington, Oregon and Idaho.

Other factors – high water temperatures, low stream flows and recreational stressors – in concert with this infection increase mortality.

This disease can have devastating effects on Whitefish and trout.

MORE ABOUT CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Environmental conditions overall on the Yellowstone River have been poor in terms of both flows and temperature.

Low stream flows

The Yellowstone is running at close to historic lows. Currently, the river is flowing within 280 cubic feet per second (cfs) above the all time low. Flows are expected to drop through February of next year.

Water temperatures

For more than a month starting in mid-July, daytime high Yellowstone River water temperatures (at Livingston) hovered around 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Ideal temperatures for whitefish and trout are mid-50s.

THE SIGNIFICANCE

The magnitude of the kill is unlike anything our fish health specialists have seen, and that's likely because fish in this river system are naïve to this parasite (meaning less immune to the disease) than populations previously exposed to it.

FWP is concerned that any additional stress on fish may cause similar levels of mortality in trout populations.

FWP is also concerned that the parasite could be spread from the Yellowstone River Basin to other Montana waters.

FWP'S RESPONSE

On Aug. 19, FWP implemented a complete closure to all water-based recreation on the Yellowstone River and its tributaries from Yellowstone National Park's northern boundary in Gardiner to the Highway 212 bridge in Laurel.

The closure was put in place to help limit the chance of the spread of the parasite to adjacent rivers through boats, tubes, waders and other human contact and minimize further mortality in all fish species.

Removing human activity in the area noted also allows fish to take refuge in pools without additional stressors giving them the best chance of survival.

THE DECISION

The decision to close the river was not taken lightly. It came after careful consideration by FWP's Fisheries team, Region 3 Supervisor, Region 5 Supervisor, and FWP's Director's Office after looking at the sheer magnitude of the fish kill and test results. The final decision (or approval) came from Montana's Fish and Wildlife Commission, with support from Governor Steve Bullock.

AS TO REOPENING THE RIVER

FWP understands this decision has and will have a tremendous impact on local communities, businesses and visitors. As an agency, FWP has no intent to keep the river closed any longer than necessary. FWP is doing everything it can to get the information needed to make the right decisions considering the health of the river while making sure all those affected by this closure are kept in mind and informed.

FWP's monitoring of the Yellowstone is set up so that staff can look at all segments and prioritize sampling. Again, testing takes time, but the information gathered will inform experts as to how fish in certain areas are responding.

There are no set criteria for reopening the river as this is an unprecedented event. This is a fluid situation and there is the possibility to evaluate the reopening of different segments and to some recreational uses as we gather more information.

GOING FORWARD

FWP will continue to inform the public and the media as we continue to monitor the river. We are learning everyday in order to narrow the decision space. Formal evaluation of the closure will take place at least every three days using the latest data and testing results.

RISKS TO HUMANS, PETS, ETC.

The parasite associated with this fish kill has not been shown to cause health problems in humans, birds, dogs and other mammals. However, bacteria and other harmful materials associated with decomposing fish could sicken pets. FWP is urging the public to keep pets out of contact with fish carcasses along the banks of the Yellowstone River.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Close
Menu